

Book Review

Love and Forgiveness for a More Just World

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Love and Forgiveness for a More Just World. Hent De Vries and Nils F. Schott (eds.). New York: Columbia University Press, 2015, ix + 243 pp. \$35.00 hbk. ISBN: 978-0-231-17022-2.

Essays Philos (2016)17:191-202 | DOI: 10.7710/1526-0569.1561

Published online: 8 July 2016. © Andrew Fitz-Gibbon 2016

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In her 1970 classic *The Sovereignty of Good*, Iris Murdoch said, “We need a moral philosophy in which the concept of love, so rarely mentioned now by philosophers, can once again be made central.” Since then, a number of philosophers—prominent among them Irving Singer, Alan Soble, Martha Nussbaum, Harry Frankfurt, Luce Irigaray, and Emmanuel Levinas—have made an attempt, if not quite to centralize love in moral discourse, at least to give love serious consideration. In feminist philosophy, since the beginning of the ethics of care in the 1980s, something like love—if the act of caring is loving action—has taken center stage. De Vries and Schott have

added their voice to the conversation with an important, but sometimes difficult, collection of essays, an interview, and a poem, creatively linking love with forgiveness.

Nonetheless, it remains true that love is marginalized in mainstream social and political philosophy, and considered an impracticality—mere sentimentalism—that is ill-suited for the rigors of *realpolitik* in a world dominated, since at least Sept 11, 2001, by the threat and actuality of terrorism, civil wars, and insurgences.

De Vries, Schott and their authors challenge this, claiming that, on the contrary love and forgiveness must become central for the world to be made well. Such is not a novel idea, of course, and has noble genealogy in the West from Socrates, the Jewish prophets and Jesus to the medieval mystics, the Muslim Sufis, and on to Martin Luther King Jr. who said love was central in his quest for civil rights and the *Beloved Community*, and Desmond Tutu who made much of forgiveness in the process of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa. In the East the genealogy of love includes Mozi, Zhuangzi, the Buddha, Confucius (if *ren*, humaneness, is loving concern), the Jains, and on to M.K. Gandhi.

In their foreword, the editors provide the reader with a *leitmotif* that runs through the book—*alertness*. They suggest that is the the practice of “vigilant attentiveness ... attunement to others, awareness of difference, and the patient cultivation of nascent relations, emerging communities” that love and forgiveness provide (2). Yet, the relationship between love and forgiveness is not an obvious one. The several authors try to make this shadowy relationship clear, optimistically as a way through “empirical impasse and moral fatigue” (17) with regard to “historical and ontological immanence, war and violence, closed and

static mindsets.” Thus, love and forgiveness provide an “alert” to the possibilities of what it means to be human amidst the existential difficulties of the real world.

The collection begins with an ironic and winsome poem by Haleh Liza Gafori, “Orange Alert,” woven around the theme of “terror alerts,” so prevalent in the months and years after September 11, 2001. “I am so tired of terror!” says the author.

Orange alert, really?
How about a russet alert,
A coral alert, sienna alert,
A burnt ochre , vermilion alert,
A salmon, pumpkin, persimmon alert,
A rust carrot apricot alert, a saffron alert! (24-
25)

The author leads us to see that under the alert are relationships with people of many colors, and under “the color of my skin is a soul”:

Alert me, alert us to this possibility
As we cross the sacred, wretched, swirling
river. (26)

Jean-Luc Marion’s first short chapter follows the poem and alerts us to the possibility that love is “not a passion; it is a point of view” (28). According to Marion the modern conception of love, from Descartes to the twentieth century, is like that of a disease—something that happens to you, not something that you decide. This he calls “the erotic reduction.” He suggests that with love I am no longer the center, for the center is where the beloved is. I only find myself when I am in the space occupied by the one I love (29). Descartes’ *cogito* is transformed from “I think

therefore I am” to “I am insofar as I am thought” (30). We exist only insofar as we are lovingly acknowledged by another. Forgiveness, like love, is a gift that we give to the other, and in the giving “the giver has to disappear” (33). In this way, love and forgiveness are “not an economic exchange, but a way of opening up a completely different world” (34).

Jean-Luc Marion’s second piece in the collection is a short interview with him by Hugues Choplin, with regard to power, giving a glimpse into the possibilities of the “completely different world.” Dismissing the continued usefulness of the concept of power Marion introduces the concept of “unpower”—“that which intervenes when the description of phenomenon can or even must dispense with the concept of power because this concept turns out to be inoperable in practice” (41). Neither Choplin nor Marion spell out the implications of this for love, the editors leaving the reader to make the connection. My best guess—and only a guess—is that in political terms the concept of power, either as authority or force, is inoperable when practice moves beyond mere power relationships toward loving forgiveness. To speak of force or authority when considering love or forgiveness makes little sense. For political discourse to move beyond power toward love requires a major shift.

Regina M. Schwartz in her “Revenge, Forgiveness and Love” critiques the kind of justice that is satisfied by harming another through punishment; that is through retribution. She asks “There seems to be a widespread intuition that just as those who do good should be rewarded, so those who do harm should be punished. But why? On what grounds?” She answers, “It turns out that such intuitions rest on surprisingly little grounding” (44). Using Plato’s Socrates (*Republic* 335e) and Martin Luther King Jr., Schwartz argues that to harm someone, in the belief that one

harm following another harm somehow balances the first harm, is foolish. Evil deeds are not redeemed by evil deeds. Such violent harms become a descending spiral, humiliate the opponent— sometimes annihilate—rather than convert, and creates a world of bitterness and brutality. For Plato people tend to become worse in virtue when harmed. They become even worse in virtue when doing the harm.

Using Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as "the greatest revenge tragedy in English drama" (49) Schwartz demonstrates that *Hamlet* is actually an antirevenge tragedy— and not only Hamlet. In *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *King Lear*, "Shakespeare's plays not only condemn revenge. They endorse forgiveness ..." (55). Further, for Shakespeare, forgiveness is not only the alternative to revenge, but is tied also to the discovery of love, for "love defines us as human" (56). As such, love is not merely private but preeminently public, "it is social glue ... it is tantamount to justice."

Schwartz's account of forgiveness is robust and moves beyond a psychological account of the victim's letting go of bitterness and resentment, toward the positive goal of restoration between parties. She says:

Forgiveness is not a unilateral act. It involves two: it is a response to apology. Nor is it an isolated act: it is part of a process that includes the acknowledgment of wrongdoing, remorse and apology from the perpetrator and the response of forgiveness from the injured. (57)

Further, "the duty of the offender to seek forgiveness is primary and unconditional, while the duty to grant it is

conditional upon the offender's having fulfilled her prior duty" (58).

Leora Batnitzky's "Love and Law" is a careful comparison of aspects of Judaism and Calvinism arguing that, for both religions, love and law go hand in hand. The author suggests this in contradistinction to some interpretations that see Judaism as typified by law, and Christianity by love. Both religions are rooted in the notion of covenant between God and community, in the absolute sovereignty of God, and in the election of a particular people by God. The religions differ in their understanding of humanity. For Judaism humanity is "all too human, for better and for worse" (85). For Calvinism, at least as taught by Abraham Kuyper, humanity is corrupted by sin, yet by God's "special" grace can become "Godlike" (85). Special grace, though is reserved for the elect and only the elect. The rest of humanity receive only God's "common" grace, which allows natural loving human interactions to continue (such as the mother's love of a child). Batnitzky suggests that Judaism's creation by a loving God and Calvinism's common grace are functionally the same. The ideas allow the squaring of the circle, reconciling election and universalism, and answer the question "How can Calvinism (or Judaism) live in a world in which everyone is not Calvinist (or Jewish)?" (86).

Batnitzky's positive assessment of both religions, moving them beyond the merely parochial toward the universal is helpful for members of those religions who seek a more expansive vision. However, as neither a Calvinist nor Jewish, and I assume, not among the elect, this piece leaves me with questions. It suggests remaining validity in an exclusive religion that sees its adherents as, in some way, chosen by God in ways that other people are not. For me it is just a tad "us and them," rather than "we together," which is surely a more hopeful and loving future for the world.

Volume editor Nils F. Schott adds his piece on love and community in St. Augustine, “A Mother to All.” Central to Augustine’s account is that “love unfolds in a community” (88). Schott understands Augustine as seeing the coming of Christ as “the coming or intervention of love” (90). Love is God’s gift and not an acquisition on the part of the one loved. Perhaps strangely, the precursor to accepting the gift is fear—fear of God without which the would be recipient of God’s love is indifferent (92). With fear the believer turns from self-love—a kind of love disparaged and punished by God—to the love of God. In this way “fear is intricately tied to love” (94). In Augustine love is also hierarchical. The love of the superior for the inferior is a better type of love because it “does not *want* anything” (97 italics original). Superior love arises out of plenty; inferior love arises out of need. The Christian catechetical task is to use fear and love as threat and promise to remove obstacles in the way of receiving God’s superior love. According to Schott, this only happens in a community, in loving others and being loved, in which community members “catch a glimpse of the immensity of the love of God” (106).

There follows two essays from the psychoanalytic point of view: Orna Ophir’s *Looking Evil in the Eye/I* and Albert Mason’s “Beyond Right and Wrong.” Ophir’s piece on forgiveness argues that in order to forgive, one must look courageously at the evil inside oneself. She says:

Looking in the “eye of evil” implies, precisely, not evading the full bleakness and terror of one’s own impulses of life and death. Eros and Thanatos, libido and aggression. Looking evil in the eye thus demands, first and foremost, looking evil in the *I*, that is to say, continuously observing

and confronting the violence and harm at the heart of one's self." (110, italics original)

Ophir argues that the process of forgiveness requires firstly facing one's own "murderous demons" and their desire to destroy, and secondly differentiating oneself from these demons and giving up their will for destruction (113). The process is complex and may involve fantasies of revenge that, paradoxically, help facilitate forgiveness. "Exploring them imaginatively and unreservedly, thinking them through, instead of acting on them, makes one's own sadistic fantasies potentially *curative*" (115 italics original). Ophir uses Melanie Klein to suggest that love, too, cannot be considered without first exploring destructive impulses (119), moving from the paranoid-schizoid position to the depressive one (125). That is, one perceives the other as separate from one's self, finds a sadness for damaged relationships together with an urge to repair, and ultimately begins to love.

Albert Mason, similarly uses Klein's paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, to articulate the necessary movement from "us-them" "good people-bad people" to a more integrated understanding that all people are both good and bad. When love and hate merge to produce understanding (Klein's depressive position) forgiveness can take place. Without this movement it is far easier to "split off our own badness and project it into others than to own our own faults and go through the slow, painful, and difficult process of correcting them" (131). The human defense is to project all of one's badness on to the other, and to appropriate all the other's goodness on to oneself. However, when one identifies the bad in one's self, then forgiveness is possible because identification with the other has taken place. Mason says:

Forgiveness essentially consists in a reversal of the process of dehumanization. We must first see our perpetrator as human by integrating the split view of him as a monster and seeing the whole person with his bad and good qualities, just like ourselves” (133).

Mason rehearses the feature of psychoanalysis that painful traumas and experiences are buried in the unconscious—suppressed—and continue to have effects such as depression, until the trauma is made conscious through psychoanalysis and worked through. Though Mason represents this as fact, I simply note that the theory of repressed traumatic memories continues to be debated by scholars.

The shortest piece in the collection are remarks by Jacques Derrida who says simply, “I have an empty head on love in general. And, as for the reason philosophy has spoken of love, I either have nothing to say or I’d just be reciting clichés” (142).

In his longer piece “To Forgive,” Derrida considers the question of whether one ought always to forgive, using the work of Russian, Jewish philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch. He introduces the notion of the duty of unforgiveness in the name of the victims (151). Included in this are two axioms: first, forgiveness can only be contemplated when forgiveness is asked for; and second when a crime is so serious that it crosses the line into radical evil, then forgiveness can no longer be possible. Forgiveness, then, should only be permitted on the part of the victim, in “head-to-head or face-to-face” exchanges and never by a third party (159).

Sari Nusseibeh's "Thoughts on Love" brings a helpful perspective from the fourteenth-century Arab sociologist Ibn Khaldun, seeing compassion as being:

[T]he primal instinct a mother has for her loved one or that someone has for a blood relative—the instinct that explains that person's readiness to put him- or herself in harm's way lest that harm reach their beloved. (184)

Nusseibeh argues that this primal love (compassion) is the basis for peace and justice. A political model rooted in love and compassion would be better than one linked to self-serving, fear for the self and fear of others (186).

Along the way, Nusseibeh poses an interesting challenge to the commonly asserted "you must love yourself first, before you can love others," and even Harry Frankfurt's notion that self-love is the purest form of love, in this way:

To love oneself, first of all, seems to presuppose two selves, the lover and the loved. And if a conceptually necessary feature of loving the other is selflessness, or holding a concern for the other above that for oneself, then would not self-love be reduced to an unfathomable unconcerned concern? (188)

The final piece in the collection, "The Passionate Utterance of Love," by volume editor Hent de Vries, was, for this reviewer, the most dense and unfathomable chapter. The author summarizes the earlier argument by Jean-Luc Marion regarding the phenomenon of love, adding his own gloss, and covers the mysticism and powerlessness of love, texts

and images, the utterance “I love you,” insincerity, and pragmatism. But this chapter is no easy read, and the argument extremely complex. It is not helped by a style of writing unfamiliar to most readers—long sentences with numerous sub-clauses. The chapter begins with a ninety-four-word sentence, and continues in the same vein throughout. The final sentence to the chapter has one hundred and thirty words. In all seriousness, its meaning was lost to me by the time I had reached the end of the sentence. I read and re-read the sentence several times, still struggling. This is a pity, as I’m sure hidden in the verbiage is an interesting commentary on Marion and an important argument. However, perhaps the complexity of the last chapter is intentional, and might speak to the transcategorical and unutterable nature of love. I leave that for the reader to decide!

All in all, this is a worthy addition to the literature on love and forgiveness. Its chapters are uneven in length and depth of subject, wide-ranging in their scope, and as such it will provide most readers with puzzles to ponder, and morsels to savor. As its editors suggest, *Love and Forgiveness* is an alert toward a more just world.